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Debbie Leacock

*Christian Brothers University*

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# Professional Females: Are There Enough Available? Gender Bias of Female Victims

**Debbie Leacock**

Christian Brothers University

## ABSTRACT

*The purpose of this study was to determine whether females who are over or under the age of 35 years old would prefer to interact with professionals of the same gender throughout the interrogative, medical, and legal situations that they would be presented with after being victimized. A written victimization situation was prepared for each of the participants to react to for this study. No specific reference was made to the gender of the assailant or specific sexual violence that had occurred to the victim in the hypothetical crime situation that was presented to each participant in the two age groups surveyed. It has been theorized that, because of the development of personal schema, in conjunction with maturation combined with personal perceptions which are influenced by the media, it could be demonstrated that females over age 35 years of age would have a stronger preference to interact with same gender professionals. The statistical results suggest that when having to make a choice in the gender of professionals with which the female victim would need to interact after being victimized, only in the case of the Police Officer was there a significant difference in gender preference between the two age groups.*

With the twentieth century coming to a close and the new millennium lurking on the horizon the American public has become actively involved in researching the errors of the past. With the United States as the forerunner of governmental democracy and gender equality in a society, the American people have been continually confronted with the pressures of resolving prejudicial dilemmas when involved in crisis situations. The news media, unfortunately, have aided in the exploitation of the female victims of crime. As the result of crime frequencies, as Wood (1994) discusses throughout her treatise, the news headlines seem to be placing blame on the female victims by claiming provocation by them of the assailant or dismissing the violence as just another assault.

In a study conducted by Pierce & Harris (1993) subjects were asked to read a victimization scenario and rate their perceptions of the crime by using their own personal schema. This research did survey men as well as women, yet the results were consistent. The situations they read were considered violent and abusive by both genders who participated.

As presented to society throughout the daily media reports, domestic violence has continued to rise in spite of the help groups available. Quite often the female victims have had the displeasure of becoming both victim and defendant when arriving in the court room. Harris & Cook (1994) studied the perception of participants after reading a scenario depicting spousal abuse by both husbands and wives. "Implications through their research determined that service agencies and the court's treatment of battered victims, under certain conditions, may make public sympathy or a jury verdict of guilty, harder to come by" (p. 564). Additional

evidence to support gender bias in the legal profession was noted specifically in the research which was performed by Gyls & McNamara (1996). The hypothesis they researched stated "that male prosecuting attorneys would endorse rape myths more than female prosecuting attorneys, and their results supported it" (p. 17). Why, then, should a female victim be more confident and reassured regarding her trial when her male attorney does not understand the extent of her injustice?

It is necessary to explore the type of medical and psychological support our society provides or offers a female victim. This would aid in addressing the issue of a life for the victim after the crime. Previous studies have measured the results of the female victim's "self esteem, sexual behavior, and emotional adjustments" (Kulkoski & Kilian, 1997, p. 347) after the initial victimization has taken place. Kulkoski & Kilian examined the "longer process of reorganization, during which the victim must deal with the long-term psychological consequences of the assault" (p. 347). Logically, the strength of the confidence one would place in her lawyer and medical physician would assist in avoiding lengthy traumatic psychological reasoning and restructuring.

Additional support to this current research hypothesis was obtained from a study conducted by Waskel & Phelps (1995). Their research studied the uniqueness of crises that occur in the mid-life stages of females and how the events affect their future schema throughout their normal life development. The results from the preword research has aided in setting the ground work for this current study, which is designed to codify the opinions of female victims of violence as they grow older.

Specifically, females who are over the age of 35 would prefer to interact with professionals of the same gender throughout the interrogative, medical, and legal situations that they would be presented with after being victimized.

## **METHOD**

### **Participants**

The participants in this research were female students at Christian Brothers University in Memphis, Tennessee and adult females from off campus, for the purpose of collecting a wider range of opinions, as well as to sample two diverse age groups. Fifty female students age 35 years or younger, and fifty females ages 36 years and over who aided in this research, were not paid for their participation and were treated in accordance with "Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct" (American Psychological Association, 1992). More specifically noted, the fifty female students who participated in the age 35 years or younger group were ages 18 to 22.

### **Materials**

This study was conducted by distributing a research packet to each participant individually. The packet contained a disclosure stating the purpose of the research, scenario of a hypothetical situation of a victimization crime scene, and a questionnaire which ascertained the reactions of females when confronted with a proposed scenario to which they were to react.

The questionnaire asked each participant to indicate the gender of the following professionals with which they would prefer to interact with regarding the victimization situation they just read: police officer, lawyer, and

medical doctor. They were then asked if they had ever been a victim of such a crime, and if so, at what age. They were also asked to check off the age category they currently fit into: thirty-five years old or younger or 36 years old and older.

### **Procedure**

The student participants were selected from the population of females throughout the campus at Christian Brothers University. The off campus population was obtained by asking females approximately 36 years of age and older in a shopping mall to participate in a psychological study.

The purpose of using the identical situation questionnaire for all participants is so that each female participant would have an equal opportunity to evaluate the same victimization scenario. It was also explained that the questionnaire was intended for females only and, if at any time any participant felt uncomfortable with any questions asked, they could choose to not complete the survey. Verbal as well as written instructions were given to the participants regarding the research. Ample opportunity was given at the beginning of the research to answer any and all questions. The participants' anonymity was guaranteed by asking that they not write their names on the questionnaire, and that they use a pencil provided by the administrator, to avoid the possibility of a particularly distinctive color of ink or marker to detect their identity.

### **RESULTS**

The original hypothesis stated that females age 36 years and older would prefer to interact with professionals of the same gender throughout the interrogative, medical, and legal situations that would likely follow their victimization crisis.

In the age category of 36 years old and older participants preferred the police officer's gender to be female 64% (32) versus male 36% (18), which is significant at  $p < .05$  ( $c^2 = 3.92$ ,  $df = 1$ ). There was no specific preference among participants 35 years old and younger, all of whom were actually women 18 to 22 years of age.

In the category of 35 years old and younger, 18 to 22 years of age, participants preferred the gender of their physician to be female 86% (43) versus male 14% (7) which is significant at  $p < .000$  ( $c^2 = 25.92$ ,  $df = 1$ ). In the age category of 36 years old and older participants preferred their physician to be female 84% (42) versus male 16% (8), significant at  $p < .000$  ( $c^2 = 23.12$ ,  $df = 1$ ). There was no significant gender preference for lawyer in either age group yet in both age groups a preference for a female lawyer was prevalent. (See Table 1 and Figs. 1 and 2).

Five out of the one hundred participants responded that they had been a victim of a crime. These five fit into the normal response of their age categories, indicating gender preferences that were consistent with the majority of those within the same age group who had not been crime victims.

### **DISCUSSION**

This research study was developed to support the hypothesis that victimized females, age 36 years and older, would prefer to interact with same gender professionals because of their maturation, perceptions, and schema which continue to develop throughout life. The cognitive functions that aid in changing the human thinking and perception processes, extremely complex as they are, assisted in providing the necessary background to support this study. Females in the 36 years and older population preferred to interact with female professionals rather than male professionals in each of the categories after being victimized. Human interactions in daily activities and environmental surroundings can change peoples' attitudes as well as create a script by which they have lived for many years past. Interestingly, the results of this study revealed that the younger females, ages 18 to 22 years, did prefer to interact with female professionals in the categories of medical doctor and lawyer. These findings did not support the rationale of the researcher who felt that the younger category of females would prefer a male father figure in all of the categories presented after being victimized. With the ever changing world surrounding society it is comprehensible to under-

stand how and why each person views life's situations differently. Regarding the females that were actually surveyed, questions which were asked after the completion of the study revealed a dimension of cognition that could not be codified within the context of the choices provided by the research questionnaire. One comment which was made by one of the participants who was 19 years old after the completion of the questionnaire was that she hoped to someday be financially capable of owning a car with an alarm button and automatic door locks.

It was determined that this current study would be beneficial for the purpose of better understanding the psychological restructuring of female victims, how maturation changes the human perceptions of situations, and how personal schema allows people to interpret identical situations differently. This is reflected in the statistical results in the category of police officer. The age category of 35 years and younger, ages 18 to 22, chose the preferred gender of their officer as male 31 times and female 19 times. These specific calculations are not significant at .05 yet they are, at .09, indicating marginal significance. In the age group of 36 years and older, female was preferred 32 and male 18. A discussion which took place among five participants after testing who were in the category of age 36 and older revealed that they would not want any man near them after being victimized. No reference was made to the assailant's gender or race in the hypothetical scenario tested, yet context effects were obviously perceived by each participant individually according to their personal scripts.

In order to increase the power of this study, it is recommended that three categories of age be implemented for future research in this area. These categories should be as follows: twenty-two years old and younger, 23 years old to 35 years old, and 36 years old and over. Research results from a replication should be compared to this current study for a more accurate understanding of female gender needs. By expanding the age categories the results obtained would reveal at which age the male/female gender preference does occur. These results would further allow to the researcher to expand on the cognitive theories of maturation and it's relationship to schema and perceptions.

The language style for which the hypothetical victimization scenario was written was specifically focused toward a general, educated audience. It was not intended to lead the reader toward a racial or gender bias, income category, nor was it intended to be geographically specific. This intention was carefully adhered to because of the populations of the participants sought in this study; campus college students and older females from different locations in the world. Some of the female participants from the college campus were from India, Spain, and Mexico as well as various locations in the United States. It was also necessary to not dismiss the victim as being from out of town or an uneducated individual, but rather to make the situation as realistic as possible. The off campus participants, generally the 36 years old and older category, would likely be familiar with the same dinner situation with friends or have known of a similar victimization situation. It was presupposed by the researcher that each participant would have a perception of the scenario presented. Also, because of the maturation and schema of the 36 year old and older group, they would have lived through, possibly known a victim of, or been witness to a similar situation, and would have preferred, because of their experiences, to interact with female professionals rather than males.

Life experiences and personal perceptions of events and situations change as maturity takes hold. A person's framework of knowledge about the world and their self development reorganize one's opinions as well as restructure one's beliefs. The perceptual learning of the age 35 years old and younger group was presupposed, by the researcher, to still require the father figure male as a protector when a crisis of this nature occurred. The majority of the population surveyed in the age 35 years old and younger category, as previously noted, were in the age group of 18 to 22 years of age. Follow-up research would be recommended to better quantify and qualify the results of this age group.

As noted throughout psychological studies, women are believed to be of a more compassionate nature, more willing to help out the lowly and strive to meet the needs of others. Women are more likely to collaborate, function as a team player, and recognize her personal desires to achieve goals. Women police officers,



lawyers, and medical doctors seem to be proficient only in the movies. Kaschak's (1992) publication discusses how the media only report what sells. Sex, scandals and crime sell advertising, whereas the few token female professionals who make the headlines seem to be page four news. The following scenarios are often missing from the media: the dedicated policewomen who wholeheartedly aid the victims of rape and personal crime, the female attorneys who work 24 hours a day to prosecute molesters and stalkers and the female physicians who have dedicated their practice to the traumas that affect victims of abuse and sexual assault. This study and Pierce & Harris' (1993) have revealed the need for professional females to make themselves available to their gender in time of crisis. Entering into the new millennium should be a positive motion. Future gender bias research will aid this culture in pursuing an equal future for all professionals. The questions raised as a result of this research warrant additional studies of gender bias situations.

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## APPENDIX

The following questionnaire was specifically designed to ascertain the opinions of females when they are confronted with a violent situation. This research is being conducted for the Statistical Research class under the supervision of Elizabeth Nelson, Ph.D.

If you have any questions or apprehension regarding any section of this questionnaire, please feel free to stop before its completion. Thank you in advance for your assistance in this research.

Please read carefully:

You have just left the restaurant where you have enjoyed the company of good friends and a lovely dinner. Car keys in hand, you press your alarm button, the doors unlock, and you are ready to get into the driver's seat. You didn't notice a person crouched down behind the car as you got near, but in a second this person has startled you, grabbed your hand which has the keys and panic alarm button, pushed you into the car and has punched you in the face. You are so dazed, semi-conscious, that you really do not know what has happened or what this person looks like. By the time you become aware of this violence and scream for help you notice your purse is gone, along with your keys. Your screams have drawn help and the police arrive promptly. You are so shaken that you don't notice that you are bleeding and your clothes are quite torn up.

You will have to relive this situation many times over with professionals of a variety of occupations. Please think carefully before answering the following questions.

Please indicate the GENDER of the following professionals with which you would prefer to interact regarding this victimization situation by circling your choices (choose only one gender per profession).

POLICE OFFICER	Male	Female
MEDICAL DOCTOR	Male	Female
LAWYER	Male	Female

Have you ever been a victim of a crime such as this before? Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_

If so, what age were you when the situation occurred?

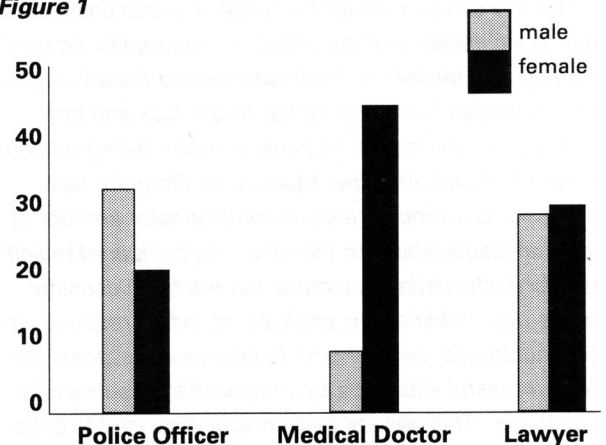
What age category do you fit into now?  
35 or younger \_\_\_\_\_ 36 and over \_\_\_\_\_

Table 1

Results: Gender Preference Questionnaire

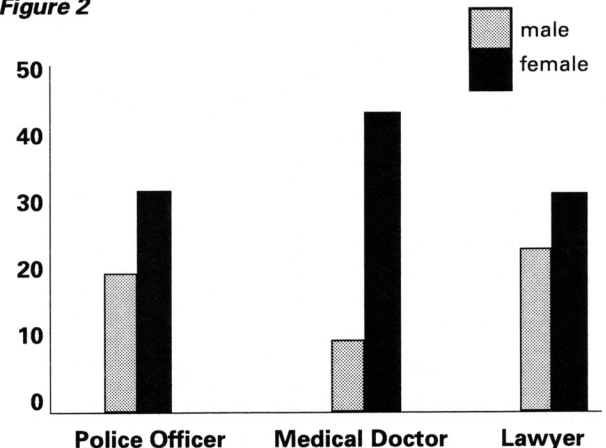
	35 years and younger		36 years and older	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
Police Officer	31 (62%)	19 (38%)	18 (36%)	32 (64%)
Medical Doctor	7 (14%)	43 (86%)	8 (16%)	42 (84%)
Lawyer	24 (42%)	26 (52%)	19 (38%)	31 (62%)

Figure 1



Graph displays gender preferences of professionals after being victimized for age group 35 years old and younger.

Figure 2



Graph displays gender preferences of professionals after being victimized for age group 36 years old and older.